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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000544

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

ALSO FOR IO A/S BRIMMER

P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY

USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER

NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT

DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFMIN MURR: VOTERS DO NOT LINK AOUN WITH HIZBALLAH

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Defense Minister Elias Murr told visiting NEA DAS David Hale that Christian voters do not understand that a vote for Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun is a vote for his ally, Hizballah. He said it was imperative that March 14 leaders communicate this message before the June 7 parliamentary elections. Similar messages from the U.S. that stress its policy on Hizballah remains firm would also help convince voters, he suggested. Murr added that the Armenian party Tashnaq, currently allied with Aoun, also needed to hear this from its counterparts in the U.S.

¶2. (C) Murr complained that March 14 leaders were not campaigning enough in the media and were missing opportunities to attack Hizballah. According to Murr, President Sleiman proposed the formation of an independent block of deputies to counter Hizballah's demand for a blocking third in the next parliament, a solution that Murr assessed was achievable. Murr rejected the idea of an Israeli offer to withdraw from Ghajar before the elections, believing Hizballah would somehow twist the move to its advantage. End summary.

VOTERS DO NOT ASSOCIATE
AOUN WITH HIZBALLAH!

¶3. (C) Visiting NEA DAS David Hale, accompanied by Ambassador and PolOff, met with Defense Minister Elias Murr at his home in Rabieh on May 9. Describing his recent campaigning efforts, one month before the June 7 parliamentary elections, Murr estimated he saw 4,000 people from his home district in Metn during the previous week, "all in groups of 30!" (Comment: By our calculation, this would entail 19 meetings a day. End comment.)

¶4. (C) He said he was astonished to learn from the Christian voters that they do not perceive a vote for Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun is a vote for his ally, Hizballah. Instead, he explained, they are voting against Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea. He said the people with

whom he spoke were receptive to his pronouncements that a vote for Aoun is synonymous with Hizballah, and he argued that much more needed to be done to convince voters, whom he perceived were split evenly between Aoun and March 14 Christians.

¶15. (C) According to Murr, the Christian voters believe that the prospect of U.S.-Iranian negotiations obviates their fear of Hizballah. Clear messages from the U.S. can help convey to voters, particularly in Keserwan, Jbeil, and Metn, he noted, that they are voting for Hizballah if they support Aoun in the elections. He said that Hizballah has cleverly moved to the back seat so that voters do not recognize it is Hizballah that will be in control if they elect Hizballah's frontman, Aoun.

¶16. (C) The U.S. can move Hizballah into the front seat for the voters, he suggested. Statements asserting that Hizballah remains a terrorist organization are very helpful, Murr offered. Hale assured Murr that the U.S. policy on Hizballah will remain unchanged.

¶17. (C) Referencing a conversation he had with Secretary Clinton during his April trip to Washington, Murr inquired whether President Obama would be willing to make a brief statement on local Lebanese television reinforcing this message of Hizballah as a terrorist organization that threatens the security of Lebanon. He complimented the Secretary's strong messages of support during her April 26 visit to Lebanon, but lamented that the April 29 release of the four generals, detained in connection with former PM

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Rafiq Hariri's assassination, made a bigger splash in the media.

TASHNAQ'S U.S.
PRESENCE CAN HELP

¶18. (C) The Armenian Tashnaq party in the U.S. and Canada has powerful influence in Lebanon, Murr said. Murr suggested that the U.S. reach out to the U.S.-based Tashnaq leadership, who can play an influential role with Tashnaq Lebanon. (Note: Currently, Tashnaq is allied with Aoun in Metn. End note.) Murr said Tashnaq in Lebanon needed to realize that a vote for Aoun is a vote for Hizballah.

MORE CAMPAIGNING
NEEDED IN THE MEDIA

¶19. (C) Murr noted that the opposition has four media outlets working in its favor, while the majority barely has any, except majority leader Saad Hariri's Future TV. He said that Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) is 60 percent of the time favoring Aoun, and 40 percent of the time reporting with neutrality. Murr criticized March 14 leaders for not making the rounds on the political talk shows.

¶10. (C) He said he found solace from a May 6 conversation he had with President Sleiman, who assured Murr that Saad had received financing from the Saudis the previous day. Murr stressed that March 14 leaders needed to be spending more on their campaign, and complained that former President and Kataeb leader Amine Gemayel was stingy with his money. Murr disclosed that his family was spending his personal money on the campaign. (Note: Murr is not running in the elections, but his father, MP Michel Murr, is competing in a close race in Metn. End note.)

¶11. (C) Repeating his concern that March 14 leaders were not working hard enough, Murr declared that he was nervous about the elections. He added that he was disappointed Saad's May 7 speech announcing the Beirut III list of candidates did not attack Hizballah, in what he believed was a good opportunity

because the date coincided with the one-year anniversary of the May 2008 clashes. According to Murr, Saad was "very worried" about the outcome in Zahle and "a bit" worried about all other districts.

¶12. (C) "18 assassinations -- none directed against anyone from March 8 -- and March 14 is not using this in its messaging!" he stated with frustration. He also pointed to the two-year closure of parliament accompanied by the Hizballah tents shutting down the city and the events of May 2008 as other key tools for March 14 to use.

INDEPENDENT BLOCK SOLVES
ISSUE OF BLOCKING THIRD

¶13. (C) Murr said that the issue of Nazem Khoury's independent list in Jbeil has been resolved because Sleiman agreed to appoint March 14 SYG Fares Suaid as one of his ministers in the next cabinet. (Note: Suaid is a candidate in Jbeil, and Khoury's announcement of a list that excluded Suaid risked splitting the anti-March 8 vote. The purported offer by President Sleiman gives Suaid a graceful exit, if he chooses to take it. End note.)

¶14. (C) According to Murr, Sleiman proposed a resolution to another plaguing issue -- whether Hizballah's demand for a blocking third will be met. Sleiman reportedly suggested that the new opposition (whether it is March 14 or March 8), coupled with the President's bloc, will hold the blocking third. This way, the middle bloc offers a balance to both sides, and Hizballah (with Aoun) will not possess a veto power.

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¶15. (C) Murr estimated that six or seven independent deputies are needed to achieve the right-sized middle bloc. He predicted that as many as nine deputies could ally with the President: One from Jbeil (Nazem Khoury); one from Keserwan (Mansour Ilbon); three or four in Metn (including Michel Murr); two in Beirut I (Nayla Tueini and Michel Pharaon); and one in Baabda (Edmond Gharios). Hale remarked that he felt reassured by the prospect of an independent bloc.

NOW IS NOT THE TIME
TO RESOLVE GHAJAR

¶16. (C) Hale raised the issue of Israeli withdrawal from Ghajar. Murr said that such a move would not be helpful before the elections because Hizballah could use the media to spin this to its benefit and accuse Israel and the U.S. of proposing withdrawal in order to influence the elections. He strongly believes March 14 would be unable to take credit for Israel's offer. He further believed March 14 could not gain anything elections-wise from such an announcement. Admitting that PM Fouad Siniora will want an imminent resolution on Ghajar, Murr reaffirmed that it was simply "not a good time" before the elections.

¶17. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.
SISON